

Eagle, 1793

Any of various large diurnal birds of prey of the family Accipitridae, including members of the genera *Aquila* and *Haliaeetus*, characterized by a powerful hooked bill, keen vision, long broad wings, and strong soaring flight.

TYPE/RIG/CLASS: Schooner

LAUNCHED: 1793

COST: \$1,247.98

DECOMMISSIONED: Sold 14 September 1799 for \$595.00.

DISPLACEMENT: 55 65/95 Tons

PROPULSION: Sail

LENGTH: 55' 10"

BEAM: 17' 6"

DRAFT: 6' 8"

ARMAMENT: Probably ten muskets with bayonets; twenty pistols; two chisels; one broad axe.

COMPLEMENT: 4 officers, 4 enlisted, 2 boys

Remarks:

Although little documentation exists regarding any of the first ten cutters' activities--most of the correspondence and logbooks from the era were destroyed by fire when the British Army burned Washington, DC (including the Treasury Department building in which these records were stored) during the War of 1812 and another fire at the Treasury Department in 1833 (through no fault of the British this time)--these government vessels undoubtedly carried out a myriad of tasks. Many of these duties were spelled out in letters from the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, to the various collectors of customs, who were in direct charge of the cutters and their crews. The duties specifically assigned to the cutters and their crews as legislated by Congress and expounded by Hamilton included:

- boarding incoming and outgoing vessels and checking their papers (ownership, registration, admeasurement, manifests, etc.)
- ensuring that all cargoes were properly documented
- sealing the cargo holds of incoming vessels
- seizing those vessels in violation of the law

They were also tasked with a number of other duties that were not related to protecting the revenue. These included:

- enforcing quarantine restrictions established by the federal, state or local governments
- charting the local coastline
- enforcing the neutrality and embargo acts
- carrying supplies to lighthouse stations
- carrying official (and unofficial) passengers
- other duties as assigned by the collector

Their primary purpose, however, was to protect the revenue of the new nation by deterring smuggling. That meant sailing out of the port to which they were assigned and intercepting vessels before they came too close to the shore. It was here, well out of the harbor but within sight of the coast, that smugglers unloaded part of their cargoes into smaller "coaster" vessels or directly onshore to avoid customs duties. The collectors usually had smaller boats that could check vessels as they sailed into port. Therefore these ten cutters were not harbor vessels; they were designed to sail out to sea, survive in heavy weather, and sail swiftly so that they might overtake most merchant vessels. They were the nation's first line of defense against attempts to circumvent the new nation's duties, the country's major source of income during this period.

Cutter History:

The *Eagle* was one of the first ten revenue cutters. She has been often misidentified as the cutter *Pickering* which was in fact not launched until 1798 (and so was not among the first ten cutters). The *Eagle* was built in Savannah, Georgia for service in that state's waters. Savannah remained her homeport throughout her career as a revenue cutter.

The only surviving documentation regarding the cutter *Eagle*'s construction, dimensions, or her rig is a description written when she was sold in 1799:

"that the said ship or vessel has one deck and two masts, and that her length is fifty five feet ten inches, her breadth seventeen feet six inches, her depth six feet eight inches and that she measures fifty five 66/95 tons; that she is square sterned long quarter has Quarter Deck Badges and no Galleries and an Eagle head."

Some documentation does survive that provides a glimpse at her duties, however. Cutters typically were assigned to duty by the local collector of customs and as such they carried out a myriad of tasks and the *Eagle* was no exception. She was assigned to enforce the quarantine restrictions imposed during the outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793. For that task she lay off Cockspur Island and prevented any vessel carrying infected persons from entering Savannah Harbor. According to some documentation discovered by Florence Kern, the *Eagle*'s commanding officer "did not feel obliged to be at the helm of EAGLE at all times," and therefore left her in the care of her first mate, Hendrick Fisher, on many occasions.

There are glimpses in the records of some of her adventures as a revenue cutter. She had a small hand in the establishment of the United States Navy when, in 1794, *Eagle* delivered woodcutting supplies to contractors on St. Simons Island. The contractors were to supply wood for the frigates recently authorized by Congress, an authorization that marks the birth of the nation's second oldest sea-going service. There is also some record of her being captured and held in U.S. territorial waters by a British man-of-war in 1795 while the cutter was on an "unofficial" mission. Senator Pierce Butler, from South Carolina, needed to transport a cargo of wool to his plantation on St. Simons Island and somehow convinced either Hendrick Fisher, the acting commanding officer of *Eagle* as Howell was not available--or the local customs collector--that the *Eagle* should carry out this task.

Trouble appeared off Jekyll Island, when the Royal Navy sloop of war *Lynx*, under the command of Captain J. P. Beresford, fired a shot across the cutter's bow. Fisher attempted to hove-to, but the Senator ordered him to sail on. The *Lynx* then began to fire continuously as the *Eagle* sailed towards the shoal waters on the north point of Jekyll Island. As the *Lynx* drew too much water to continue the chase, Beresford sent his pinnace and cutter, in charge of Lieutenant Alex Skene, in pursuit. They quickly overtook the larger schooner and came on board, demanding to know why they did come about when fired upon by a vessel of his majesty's navy. After learning the schooner was in fact a revenue vessel of the U.S. government, the Royal Navy lieutenant returned, with his men, to their boats and hence to their sloop.

In the ensuing international political battle brought about by this clash, Beresford claimed to be outside the 12 mile limit and noted that the schooner was not flying any flag. The national ensign was in fact not displayed on board the *Eagle* for unexplained reasons but was instead stored in the captain's cabin. The *Eagle* did apparently display some sort of small "pennant," but it was not visible to the British man-of-war.

She was sold on 14 September 1799 for \$595.00.

Crew:

John Howell, Master; 1793-1799.

Hendrick Fisher, First Mate, 1793-1798 (?)

John Wood, Second Mate, 1793-1794

James Christian, Second Mate, 1794 -1795

Benjamin Forsyth, Second Mate, 1795-1798; promoted to First Mate in 1798 (?)

William Duncan (died while a seaman on *Eagle* in 1797)

Sources:

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